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LOVE, LOSS, AND THE “ART” OF MAKING GUMBO

An Interview with Eileen Julien

by Shona N. Jackson

This interview was conducted by phone on Wednesday, May 3, 2006.

JACKSON: Where did you grow up?

JULIEN: In New Orleans.

JACKSON: New Orleans. And what was that like?

JULIEN: Well, it was just where I grew up. It's not really until you leave home that you understand the distinction of the place that you've lived and just take for granted. It was very family, a place where relations were important and Sundays were days to go visiting, seeing people, relatives and so. It was very family oriented, very Catholic.

JACKSON: Very Catholic.

JULIEN: Yeah, I think even for people who were not Catholic it was nonetheless quite Catholic, even in the way the city functions and so forth. Of course, when I grew up it was mostly segregated too.

JACKSON: When did you leave New Orleans?

JULIEN: 1969.

JACKSON: How important was food either in its abundance or lack in your world as a child?

JULIEN: It was *very* important. My mother was a school teacher, my father was a postman. We didn't lack for anything that we really needed. And neither did my relatives. Many men were postmen, at least in our context, and there were some teachers, my mother's friends and her sister, my dad's sister. We were, if you will, middle class, but not the wealthy middle class of doctors and lawyers, just a kind of small bourgeoisie, you know. And food was important. In fact, your question reminds me of a couple of things, *[laughter]* a bit of family

lore. My grandmother used to say, for example, when you were going to eat at someone's home, she would say, "Well, you should always eat a little something before you go." For her, you never knew for sure that there would indeed be food. That was my grandmother's take, that you should eat because you just couldn't be sure what people would actually be giving you. You just didn't know what things could happen. My mother's attitude was one of surprise because going out to eat at other people's homes was not thought of as being "invited out to dinner." It wasn't thought of in that way. She once said to me, this was when I was in graduate school at Wisconsin and I told her I'd been invited out to dinner, "Well, do they know how to cook?!" She was very concerned that maybe they wouldn't really know how to fix good-tasting food you would want to eat. New Orleanians can be finicky about eating other types of cuisine. And now, you know, something's happened in the nation around food that's sort of different from when I grew up.

JACKSON: What do you mean?

JULIEN: Well, certainly in the fifties, and even the sixties, people didn't go to restaurants like they do now. A big pastime for professional people and wealthy people these days is to go out to dinner and to be invited to other homes for dinner. We ate at other people's homes a lot, but it wasn't like being invited out to dinner. It was just sort of normal. It was just an extension of your family. So, it wasn't "going out to dinner." In New Orleans, there were two main black restaurants when I was growing up. In fact, for a long time there was just one that I can remember. It was only later, in the sixties that there was a second one that became pretty well known. Dooky Chase was the one that had been there from when I was very small. And, I think, it was the one that people knew of and went to. There were other neighborhood spots, the Baquet's, but, mainly, people didn't really go out in the way we do now.²

JACKSON: Do you remember eating gumbo as a child?

JULIEN: Oh! Of course! [*Laughter*] Absolutely! Sure.

JACKSON: Who made it primarily? Did you eat it at your house more often than you ate it at other homes?

JULIEN: I ate it at my house, I ate it at my aunt's house, I ate it at my grandmother's house, I ate it at my mother's friend's house. We ate gumbo everywhere and you would eat it at club meetings, you ate it at lots of places. Gumbo was very common. And I was thinking about this too, probably, if you gave me two cups of gumbo I could tell you which one my mother had fixed and which one my mother's sister had fixed. They had a little different way of doing it. I think even today I could tell the difference if it were possible to have, you know, cups of gumbo from back then.

JACKSON: Would you say, then, that its consumption was dependant upon a particular community of people, a particular organization of people since it wouldn't necessarily be

served in a fancy restaurant, but it would be eaten amongst your family, amongst your extended family, amongst friends?

JULIEN: Well, you could get it at Dooky's, which was *the* black Creole restaurant. You could also get it at Chez Hélène which was another black restaurant, and then there was Eddie's. Those were the three my family went to most. The fanciest restaurants were segregated in New Orleans up until the sixties. It was served in those restaurants for wealthy white New Orleanians or for tourists, white tourists, that is to say. And so I never went into a fancy restaurant. The first sort of restaurant that was desegregated that I ever went to was the Court of Two Sisters and that was maybe '68. Other than that, mostly people didn't especially go to restaurants to order gumbo because they were eating it at home all the time.

JACKSON: How has New Orleans changed since you were a child, in terms of its racial and economic make up and with that, I guess, the making of gumbo?

JULIEN: Right. Well, when I was little, the city was fairly segregated. I mean there were white sections, black sections and then, with greater and greater "integration" based on these Supreme Court decisions, the whites moved out of New Orleans into Jefferson Parish. People who had money—except for the people who live in the Garden District, up along St. Charles Ave near Tulane and Loyola and Carrollton and all that, except for those white families and also those families who lived on the lake, who were very wealthy—basically the middle class whites essentially abandoned the city to black people and they moved to Jefferson Parish, to Kenner or to Metairie, to Harvey. One consequence was that all of the better stores moved out the city of New Orleans so that if you want to go shopping in New Orleans today, all of the department stores that were there in my youth are no longer there. Of course, now, there's a general phenomenon that cities have lost, you know, department stores. They've been replaced by malls in the suburbs and so forth, but in the case of New Orleans, quite specifically, there's more white money in the suburbs. My father, who was a staunch New Orleanian—he was from the country, he was from upriver, but he loved New Orleans—I mean, he would hate it if ever my mother went to Jefferson Parish to buy things because he felt that this was depriving the city of New Orleans of its livelihood. And in fact, one of the terrible things has been that New Orleans has had an extremely regressive sales tax of 10 percent on everything. I mean, there are places in the U.S. where you might have a sales tax on wine or furs or restaurant food, but you wouldn't have it just on ordinary food or shoes for your kids, but in New Orleans everything is taxed. And that's because the city lost its tax base and there was hardly anything it could do that the state legislature would approve to get money back in. So, all those people who moved to Jefferson Parish who were working in the city, they would come into the city to make their money, and take it back out to Jefferson Parish. And the city could not get any sort of income tax on those people, no payroll tax. There were no toll roads for people coming into New Orleans. So, the city really lost so much to this exodus to the suburbs that New Orleans became a predominantly black city, which is of course, why after Moon Landrieu, we basically had black mayors. The city's makeup became predominantly black. And poor, overall, even though there were some black people who came to have more and more

middle class jobs, lawyers and doctors, who could not move into those homes off of St. Charles near Loyola, Tulane and all of that. Well, I don't know if it's that they could not. Partly, I think black people who were beginning to make serious money preferred new homes. It was an aesthetic thing among black people who were not interested in old homes. So, those people were the ones who moved to New Orleans East, which got completely flooded. There was a preference for the new as opposed to the old, and there was more space in New Orleans East and you could have bigger, grander homes at cheaper prices. So the middle class, the wealthier black middle class went East and people like my dad and my mom, who had been a postman and a teacher, we lived in New Orleans proper. And my father, of course, would never consider moving out to any of these places, you know, out of the city, or even to New Orleans East, and I have to admit I've totally inherited my father's value system on this. I mean when I go to my cousin's beautiful home in the East, I cannot imagine living out there. You have to have a car. You can't walk anywhere. Public transportation is terrible out there. I love the city, you know what I mean? Even if it isn't the city like New York or Washington, built up with lots of apartment buildings, which we don't have in New Orleans. But I love the city, I love that you're close to where there's a historical center, personality and not just wonderful palatial homes that are sitting isolated, each a half a block from the next, which has never appealed to me. So those are some of the changes that you know have taken over. Meanwhile, though, in the fifties and sixties there were jobs in New Orleans. There were relatively decent jobs for black people in the city and what happened after this white flight is that the city became basically a kind of shell of its former self. I mean what do you have in the city now beyond the tourist areas? You have these places where you can cash checks, where you can pay your light bill. You have these mega supermarkets, you have liquor stores, and you have fast food places and that's it! I mean, when kids are looking for part time work or work period, all there is, is fast food. They don't even have to know how to add or subtract anymore. You just hit the button with the hamburger icon, hit the fish button. So that the city, the quality of life has degenerated over the years. But as for gumbo, it is more of an icon now than it was. I'd say there's more advertising spin on gumbo and other aspects of our culture.

JACKSON: Do you know much about the origins of gumbo?

JULIEN: Nothing I can document. But I've thought about it a good bit. I've got two speculations at least. One is about the *roux*, you know the mixture of flour and fat that becomes very dark and becomes the base of gumbo. It's a curious thing. There's nothing like it in France or in Spain or in West Africa, where I've spent a good deal of time. I've often thought that probably some cook was making some little white sauce and she burned it, she let the sauce cook too long—that's my hypothesis—and it turned dark brown and she didn't have time to remake it, so she tried to salvage it. That's my guess. Anyway, I like my story about it! I don't really know, it would be interesting to know historically. Maybe some people know more about this, but that's my guess. So, that's one thing that I've wondered about. The other thing is the *filé*. Where did the *filé* come from? I wanted to write a paper once on this called "Who put the *filé* in gumbo?" Then I read this book by Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*,³ and that's where I learned where

the *filé* came from. *Filé* is crushed sassafras leaves and apparently it was a spice that Native Americans used. One of the things that Hall's book lays out is the way in which the Africans who were enslaved, who were working in cities and towns would run off. There was all this intermarriage. There is a long history, a long relationship between Native Americans and Africans enslaved in the South and I'm now assuming that the *filé* got there via that route, that mixing of Africans and Native Americans, giving us *filé gumbo*. Of course you can make gumbo without *filé*. There are lots of different gumbos.

JACKSON: So would you say that gumbo has then both African and Native American origins?

JULIEN: Oh yeah, and I think it also has European origins. If you think about, for example, fish soups, out of the Mediterranean area, like bouillabaisse, if you think about Spanish paella, quite close to jambalaya, if you think about *jollof* rice—in Senegal it's called *ceebu yapp*. That's very close to jambalaya. If you think about the Senegalese, what they call *suppukanja*, which is made with okra. There are a couple of names for okra in other languages; one is *kanja*, another is *gumbo*. You can hear both in Senegal. And so I see Spain, France, and West Africa, and I see Native America all in this dish. And another one of my assumptions is that in the *suppukanja* that you get in Senegal, a strong element of that dish is palm oil. But it didn't become a staple of southern Louisiana cooking. Because we didn't have palm oil as far as I know. So, the palm oil goes out and we come up with other things to thicken the sauce, like the *filé*. We go from palm oil to *filé*, and I think that's interesting.

JACKSON: Was the dish primarily prepared in your home and in your family by women?

JULIEN: Oh yes. I didn't know any men who cooked gumbo. I'm sure men cooked it in restaurants, certainly you know in the white restaurants and maybe even in the black restaurants. Women were very prominent in black restaurants as well. But in the homes, in our homes, it was always women who fixed gumbo. It was never men. And when my mother was very sick, about two months before she died, she wanted gumbo desperately. I was not in Louisiana then. I was in Cambridge, Massachusetts that semester. She wanted gumbo desperately and she couldn't make it herself, so my mother instructed my father. It was the first gumbo he'd ever cooked in his life. He cooked it at age eighty. My mother told him step by step what to do and she watched him and gave him directions as he did it. I'll tell you, that gumbo, to me, when she gave it to me, it wasn't the best! But my mother thought it was the most wonderful gumbo. I'll never forget how she ate it with such joy. It was extraordinary. And, you know, my father was so proud, but when I tasted it, it didn't quite meet the standards of my mother and my aunt. [Laughter] But my mother wanted that gumbo so badly. That's the only time I know of *any* man in our family making a gumbo.

JACKSON: Why do you think she wanted it?

JULIEN: Well, my mother loved gumbo in her soul, I don't know. It's part of her identity. She'd been making it and eating it for sixty, seventy years. And, she'd been in the hospital. She shouldn't have had it. She wanted things to eat what she shouldn't eat, and, of course, in New Orleans food can be terrible, too, in terms of fat and diabetes, etc. I think it was just a deep longing to feel at home, to feel like everything was alright.

JACKSON: Did it cost a lot to make before 1969 when you were still at home?

JULIEN: Well, gumbo is one of those variable dishes. You can make it expensive if you want to by putting certain things in, or you don't have to put them in. One way to make it not so expensive is to use tiny shrimp or not to use too much sausage. Sometimes people would put in cut up hot dogs, chicken, turkey necks and backs and wings. But if you really wanted to make a royal, deluxe gumbo, you could spend a lot between the oysters and the shrimp, at least a couple different types of sausage and ham.

JACKSON: When did you start making gumbo?

JULIEN: I probably didn't make my first gumbo until the early seventies I would say. I was in graduate school in Madison, Wisconsin and when you get that longing, you know, you have to do it. So then you call up your aunt and your mother and they tell you and you try and do it.

JACKSON: Could you find the ingredients easily?

JULIEN: Well, this is another thing. This is how New Orleanians are really from the Third World. You bring the stuff from New Orleans. You get it when your mother comes up to visit, when your sister comes up to visit, when you go down. All around the country you'll find people lugging their things back with them. I know people who would go to New Orleans and come back with French bread, hot sausage. Up until a year ago I was bringing back crabs and shrimp every time my husband and I would drive down. We would drive in his van, because my husband was a painter. He had this van to lug things around and so we would go down and we would get ice and we could come back with crabs and shrimp and hot sausage, and smoked sausage. And actually, I'll tell you, this is such a coincidence, I had forgotten we were doing this interview today and so over the weekend I made this gumbo. I had wanted to make it on Easter, but I was writing this paper on Josephine Baker and I didn't have time, so I canceled the party that I had organized with my friends. So this past Sunday they all came and I made this gumbo. And it was a great gumbo. My god it was good! Actually, technically it wasn't really a gumbo because I didn't do the *roux*, but it had everything else. I got the blue crabs at the Asian market here in Bloomington, Indiana, live blue crabs. I got frozen shrimp, nice big plump ones, and all at reasonable prices compared to the supermarket. The only place I could find okra? The Asian market. This is a whole, new, "global" world.

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JACKSON: Does the dish hold the same meaning in your life now as it did when you were a child?

JULIEN: No. It's very different now.

JACKSON: How so?

JULIEN: Now, I consciously think about it. I think about it as my own act of remembering, as my own act of affirming, a certain connection. I think about it in that way. And in fact, your questions made me remember that I forgot to put out a little dish, Sunday, for my mother and my husband. My husband died in September. When I go home I'm going to do that. Thank you very much because reflecting on all of this reminded me that I hadn't done it.

JACKSON: I'm sorry.

JULIEN: Thank you. It's just such a devastating death for me. And I just remembered, oh my god, I forgot to give them a dish! My husband, who was Senegalese, loved gumbo. He loved these stews out of New Orleans, you know. So now I'm very conscious of it and I can't fix it for just anybody. It has to be people I know are probably interested in it or I have some reason to think they'll like it. I hadn't really cooked any of this food in a long time, certainly not since my husband died in September and I really felt like doing this. And the people who came Sunday were my audience. I didn't even care about eating it. I just really wanted to make it. And so that's what I did. It is a way for me to reconnect with New Orleans. There's something almost sacred about it for me now, which is why I remembered suddenly that I hadn't gone and given a little dish to my mom and to Kalidou, where I have some of their little things set up in the house.⁴

JACKSON: You've written a vignette "What I Keep in My Freezer, or You Are What You Eat," about the experience of eating and making gumbo, and in it you describe making the dish as therapy. Is making the dish also about healing, in a sense?

JULIEN: I would think so. I mean I have had a semester from hell. I have been so busy. Every moment just filled with wonderful things often enough, but I'm on overload. I'm running this little project on African expressive traditions. I'm teaching these courses, about to be chair of Comparative Literature. I just went to Northwestern with the paper on Josephine Baker. I did an art show here in celebration of my husband's life in March. All of these things have been extremely intense and wonderful, but I think cooking gumbo is a kind of way of re-centering myself and reconnecting, affirming my capacity to survive in some sense. To be joyous, to create joy within my own space, within my own house. This food, which is the food my mother died wanting to eat, is childhood, is a whole history. And I'll tell you something else. I have a really good friend from Martinique, in fact she's like my sister. I don't have any sisters or brothers, she's my sister. With her I was really introduced to rum in a way that I had never known it before, and now when I cook these

dishes, interestingly enough, I always want to have a *ti punch créole*. From the beginning, I always sort of felt that there was a bond for me with rum because it's a drink that we died to make. Our blood and our sweat is involved in rum. My husband didn't have a habit of drinking rum, but when I would make these dishes, I would say "Kalidou, make me a *ti punch*," and he had watched Micheline do it so much that he would make me a little rum when I would cook. So you know, sometimes when I'm cooking, I talk to my mother and ask her to help me with a dish. I take this little sip of rum with the lime and sugar, and Kalidou would make it for me often enough. So I guess all these things are connected, you know. I hadn't quite thought of them in these terms, but certainly, I think, it's all related.

JACKSON: Is it still about communion? In your vignette you talk about making gumbo as communion. What do you mean by communion? I ask because you also mention making an offering to your mother and to your husband and you also said that originally New Orleans was very Catholic, so I'm interested in your sense of communion.

JULIEN: That is interesting, isn't it? [Laughter] I never thought about it in terms of Catholicism. It all comes back to bonds, to creating bonds, to these women, to my grandmother. If I'm doing this and I'm alone, what do I do? I put on Nina Simone, I put on the Pointer Sisters. I have to have some music, some women singing in the background. That's what I do. And I'll tell you, my mother's mother, one of the last things she did before she died in '58 was to make crawfish étouffée. Crawfish étouffée, if you don't know it, is a really, really complicated dish to make. Now, this late August of '58, my grandmother said, "Well, we're going to make it this time and I don't know when you're going to get this again." And I remember her saying that because it took a lot of work. I was sort of annoyed because all they gave me to do was to actually pull the crust off the bread! Because they just use the white part of the bread for the stuffing. That was all I got to do, but it involves boiling these crawfish, scrubbing them down, pulling the heads off, getting the flesh out of the tails, chopping all this seasoning, adding the bread, stuffing the crawfish tails, then making a roux, adding tomato sauce. It takes two days, and we did it, my mother, my grandmother and me. Over two days. So when I cook things like this, I feel like I am in a relationship with my mom, with my aunts, with my grandmother, that somehow I'm giving testimony to them and affirming my own capacity to perpetuate these acts of culture, these acts of life, regardless of where I am. In 1971 to 1972 I was in France for the year. My mother came to visit and she made a gumbo and people *loved* it. This was Bordeaux. There were hardly any black people around. (There was one teacher from Martinique, I was a teaching assistant in this French high school.) But my mother came and cooked. And then in '95, my mother and father came to visit me in Senegal. I was on Fulbright. I had just met Kalidou who would become my husband, and we gave a huge party for my parents. My mother made a gumbo and I will never forget one friend, Fatou Sow, going back to the pot to get seconds and thirds, saying, "This is our food! This is our food!" She was serving herself, and people were eating a tremendous amount. And so the Senegalese recognized it as theirs. It had okra but no palm oil whatsoever. So, it just affirms, you know, that I'm a gumbo woman. I'm one of them.

JACKSON: With this dish, we witness, literally ‘the practice of Diaspora’, to borrow a term that Brent Hayes Edwards actually uses in his book.⁵ It’s a very specific kind of material and cultural practice which speaks to the process of making and remaking the self. To the extent that the dish and its sort of myriad of ingredients reflects a kind of cultural exchange of Black cultures in the New World, the extent to which Black cultures have actually had to take in diverse materials and transform them to literally make the self and remake themselves, would you say that the dish and its making is reflective of a kind of Black cosmopolitanism, one that is about place or maybe even in a sense a lack of place, one that speaks to the conditions of an alternative Black modernity?

JULIEN: Well you know I want to laugh in a sense, because my grandmothers, my aunt, my mother would have been completely amazed and in shock if someone said, “Oh! You’re a black cosmopolitan.” You know they would have found that totally incomprehensible. They probably would have said, “What’s a cosmopolitan?” So it’s a practice. It’s a practice of adaptation, of survival, of pleasure, and it’s not a self conscious one, I think, in the first instance when people make this food. Which is not to say, that we cannot put a name on it, like cosmopolitanism, or an “alternative modernity.” It’s not to say that we can’t consider the practice and name it. But it just makes me smile. My mother was a school teacher, of course, and my mother came to visit me in France and in Africa and so forth and had a real sense of the world. Everyone who ever saw her thought she was just the most elegant person, but it’s not a term, you know, that any of these women would have recognized themselves in. But, I certainly think that this food is a food of survival. It’s a historical food. It’s a food of inventiveness. This thing I made on the weekend, in terms of the way my mother made her gumbo, this gumbo was totally different. First of all, I went and bought the okra and the stuff at the Asian market here in Bloomington. Second of all, you know, I just do things my mother didn’t do. I boil down the shells of the shrimp and their heads—my mother never did that, I don’t think my aunt did that either. I use kielbasa sausage, you know, because I can’t find New Orleans smoked sausage. I use this expensive organic andouille sausage which you can find at all the Whole Foods and health food stores because we don’t find the hot sausage from New Orleans everywhere. So, I’m substituting things and actually, on Saturday, I basically just cleaned out my fridge to make the gumbo. I had some leftover chicken broth, I had some leftover beef broth. I had roasted a chicken a week ago and I had boiled the carcass down and used all of that. I just used everything I had. I think that it’s also a question of a certain confidence, of confidence that you can put these things together, and this is going to work. That you’ve got either enough skill or you’ve got a guardian grandmother or mother or sister, standing over you and this is going to work. [*Laughter*] Yeah, so I don’t know, I guess it is cosmopolitan. Sometimes I think that New Orleans was actually the only city in the country that I could have been born in, frankly. And I think it’s all related to this food thing.

JACKSON: Is there an irony here, in the fact that the making of the dish, the making of the self, involves so much labor and Blacks were initially brought in as laborers?

JULIEN: It definitely involves a lot of labor, but I think the thing to remember is that often enough people didn’t made gumbo alone, or many of these foods. When they were

making gumbo, they were also making the cornbread stuffing, or they were making the jambalaya, or whatever it was. You did it with someone else. There's several people, so it's a social act as well as an act of cooking. Yes, it's very labor intensive. To tell you the truth, Saturday morning, early—because I had made this gumbo-like sauce on the Saturday, then Sunday I got up and made the stuffed crabs and I made these kind of crème caramels—and I thought to myself, "Why am I doing this? It's taking hours! I don't have this time." I started getting annoyed with myself. And then I said, "But wait a minute, I really wanted to fix this, I really wanted to cook this food. I just want to cook it." And so I said, "Ok. So I'm cooking it." I think that it speaks to a world in which good things take time and you accept that fact. If you want to make it, then you're going to have to put the time in. And it's totally incomplete if you're not sharing it with somebody. I have never made these dishes and not invited somebody because it takes too much work to do if you're not having somebody. You must have somebody to share it with. And my husband cooked a lot too actually, but what kind of dishes did I fix, you know, over these last ten years that we've been together when I've been in a rush? Broiled salmon here, a little roast chicken there, I mean quick things. A thing I can do in an hour. He loved all that food. But he always said to me, "il faut une cuisine dans une maison." "There has to be somethin' cookin' here." So when I wasn't cooking, from his point of view, he would then come in and cook one of these long, hour long, two hour, three hour long kinds of Senegalese dishes, because for him a house had to have something cooking on the stove. It's like there has to be something cooking to really be a house and in a way, I sort of feel that way. I can't do it all the time, but when I do do it, it makes me feel whole, it makes me feel like I'm pleasuring myself. It's a way to feel like you're living in a community, you're not just going from your office to your bed everyday.

JACKSON: How do you think, Katrina, because you had mentioned the flood before, Katrina has in a way initiated a new dispersal, a new diaspora in a sense. How do you think that that dispersal affects the sort of making of the dish?

JULIEN: Well I think for the people who are not coming back or the people who are still away, I think making gumbo will become more critical than it was. I mean it was something people took for granted. But based on my experience, it's more critical when you're not there than when you are. And, in the city, I think people will go on and continue to make it and love it, and probably not think about it all that much. But I think the people who are not there, the Katrina diaspora will think about it a lot. It will represent a longing for home and will in fact be a re-creation of home, just as one theorization of diaspora tells us. So, this relates to what I said before, that New Orleans is the Third World, meaning we transport our foodstuffs and reconstitute ourselves through food wherever we are.

JACKSON: I want to switch gears a little. In your book *African Novels and the Question of Orality*,⁶ you resist the implication that orality is authentic and that it has to do with origins. And in your essay, "Terrains de rencontres," in *Yale French Studies*,⁷ you note that in the 1950s, Césaire, Fanon, and Wright understood that there could be, and this is a quotation from you, "no return to origins, nor is culture simply cultural 'heritage', which

can be rediscovered, dusted off, and celebrated.” Is there a way in which a dish that is a *mélange*, gumbo, that has been so transformed by cultural transmutation, is there a way in which that dish is also about authenticity and origin? That’s the first question, and the second question is, how is the continuity provided by the making of the dish, in terms of connection with family and past and history, how is that continuity not also origin at the same time?

JULIEN: Well, first, in my book, I’m arguing that orality is not *the* measure of authenticity, that African novelists do not have to include proverbs or oral stories to somehow prove that their novels are African. You know, everyone argues the novel is imported into Africa and therefore alien. I take exception to this. I try to show that reworkings of oral epics, initiation stories, and fables have more to say about the writer’s vision than about his or her Africanness. In the Césaire, Fanon, Wright article, I believe the line you quote is my paraphrase of Fanon, who was opposed to viewing the songs or sculptures of Africans and black Americans as what were called “curios” or what he called “folklore.” For Fanon, and I think this is true of all three of them, live culture is continually transformed, it isn’t something we go and view on display in a museum or a past we simply celebrate and feel good about. In fact, as is well known, Wright had real misgivings about the African “past.” Now, as for gumbo, I think that, you know, it clearly is connected to the past. But inasmuch as I wasn’t able to go down to the French market and buy this and that, inasmuch as I didn’t go to where they’re selling all the seafood, this and that, instead I went to the Asian market, I’m buying Polish kielbasa to put in it and throwing everything that I have in my fridge into this gumbo, I think that it’s an affirmation of shared beginnings and history, even though my dish is not the same as it might have been fifty or a hundred years ago. I’d say the continuity is in the act of making it, in the ritual.

JACKSON: Does gumbo sort of, and especially in terms of that new context, getting Polish sausage and making it differently, does it force us to rethink our ideas about origin and authenticity, as a culture? The dish is fundamentally it seems, from what you’ve been saying, it’s fundamentally about transformation, it’s about reinvention and it defies anything that says it’s only authentic if you make it in this way or in that way. And I was wondering what does that add to discussions about racial and cultural authenticity? I am interested in how gumbo, its origins, its production, challenges us to think about identity.

JULIEN: Racial authenticity ?

JACKSON: Racial and cultural authenticity, or the politics of authenticity that haunts black, New World cultures. Because that’s been a problem.

JULIEN: What does gumbo say about racial authenticity? To be honest, I don’t know what it says. I know that white folks eat gumbo and love it. Black folks eat gumbo and love it. Recent immigrants eat it and love it. I know that gumbo, you know, it’s not really West African but it’s certainly related. It’s not really French or Spanish, but it’s certainly related. You know, I guess I’m not worried about racial authenticity, actually. I’m actually more

worried about social justice. I'm worried about access and opportunity. I'm worried about opening doors and possibilities, about recognizing value in people, in what they're capable of creating. Quite frankly, culturally speaking, Africa has been critical to the formation of New Orleans. Yet the culture of the city has belonged to everyone. And, certainly, I mean there is racism. Certainly there have been enormous unpardonable racial disparities, inequalities, so I'm not talking about that, but I'm saying that this culture which is so heavily, heavily influenced, engendered by Africa, is a culture so powerful that the whites in New Orleans are African too in some sense. Consider the fact that in the 18th century and much of the 19th century, the language of New Orleans and southern Louisiana was an Afro-Creole based not only on French, as is widely known, but on West African languages. This was the *lingua franca* of southern Louisiana, spoken by everyone.

JACKSON: In "A Conversation with Lucianne Englert"⁸ you say, "I believe that Africa is quintessentially syncretic." Could you reflect on African cultural syncretism and the syncretic practice of New World African Diaspora cultures?

JULIEN: Well, I've been to several African countries, but the country I know the best of course is Senegal, and I just find that people there are extraordinarily supple, flexible, adaptive, I mean it's amazing. If you look at Wolof as a language, if you take that as a measure, Wolof as a language today, at least urban Wolof, has assimilated into itself, French words, American words, Arabic words. I mean this language, it's consumed the words of other languages that it's needed for its own universe. The flip side is that purists would complain this borrowing is degenerative and I don't want to deny the enormous gap in power or the problems in Senegal more generally. But regardless, culture there is dynamic. It shows a capacity for adaptation. So that's first of all what I mean. Senegal is a place where if you put a new technology at the disposal of people, my god, they will run with it. I find that to be really one of the most extraordinary characteristics of the Senegalese, despite the fact that there are of course significant traditions and enormous claims in peoples' lives made by these traditions, or at least, that is to say, people often invoke "tradition" when they don't want to change things, but this is not the problem of young people and it's not even the problem of older people. So I'm very impressed by that. In fact one of the things that Gwendolyn Hall demonstrates in her book *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* is that the root of southern Louisiana culture comes from Senegambians, and she talks about the fact that there was an extraordinary openness, a receptivity to other cultural ways of doing and thinking and being, and that there's an adaptiveness. So if I go by that and by my own experience, I think that that says something about people's adaptive capacities in Louisiana culture. I mean when you think of what southern Louisiana was like in the seventeenth, eighteenth centuries. Mosquitoes. Terrible climate. Treacherous swamps. And these people come with technologies in indigo cultivation, rice cultivation, iron work, and they take up with Native Americans. And of course they were apparently extraordinary fighters, the Bambara, I mean, so you know they came and they adapted to this new space and left a huge imprint on it. As I said before, still in nineteenth century southern Louisiana the language that was spoken, the *lingua franca* still, even after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, was an Afro-Creole based on Wolof and other West African

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languages. It was an Afro-Creole, spoken not only by enslaved Africans and free Africans, but by the “whites” as well. That says a whole lot to me.

JACKSON: It does and I asked that question about cultural authenticity and the other about syncretism because there’s a way in which to some extent we deny Africa a kind of diversity. We sort of deny that and it’s reduced to some kind of sign of past authenticity.

JULIEN: Yes, and that’s a serious, serious problem.

JACKSON: It’s a serious problem and that’s why it struck me that you said it was syncretic. We usually see only Black New World cultures as syncretic and therefore less authentic, but you’re saying that there’s a similar kind of syncretism in Africa itself.

JULIEN: Absolutely. Oh, my god! Do you see what’s happening? I mean this is for the bad as well as the good. Do you see what’s happening in terms of the way Christianity is being reconfigured within African contexts? And Islam? I mean the Islam of West Africa has little to do with the Arab world’s Islam. Or take my husband’s paintings. Someone would probably say of course, “Yeah, but he moved to the States.” But you know, it’s the same dynamic in my husband’s paintings, there’s a tremendous vitality, there’s tremendous appropriation in Africa. Look at rap music, you know young Senegalese are doing rap. Of course, some say rap actually originated in Senegal and has now come back to Africa, not to mention the rest of the world! But in any case Senegalese youth are doing rap and they’re critiquing U.S. rap because they say it’s not sufficiently political. It’s lost the meaning of rap. So absolutely, oh, absolutely.

JACKSON: In 1980 you published in *Callaloo* a translation of a short story by the Negritude writer Birago Diop called “The Price of the Camel.”⁹ In your introduction to the story, you note that it reflects an oral tradition, which you refer to as ‘oral art’. Is gumbo a kind of art? Is its *mélange* reflective of or indicative of the kind of mixture in black arts and literature, especially practices of signification?

JULIEN: Ok, this is interesting. First of all, I have come a long way since that translation of Birago Diop. And I now think that yes, he was in the era of negritude, yes, he participated in it. But I think that we exaggerated the sense of the negritude dimensions of his work. So I’ve got something on that I’ve been working on. So I just want to indicate that . . . Now, it’s interesting that you ask me, is gumbo a kind of art, this *mélange*. My husband, Kalidou, we built a studio for him behind our house here in Bloomington where he would go in the morning and he would paint and what he did in his studio is extremely distinctive. He worked with acrylic because he liked that it dried fast. He worked with acrylic on canvas and he did a lot of collage, but he also mixed Indiana clay in the paint. He took the clay of Indiana, this red brown clay, mixed it in the acrylic, and did these paintings, which are really extraordinary. And when he was waiting for something to dry, he would come into the kitchen and he would cook. So his days were spent between the pot with a spoon and the canvas with a paintbrush. And his way of cooking was totally, totally this

mélange, this method of mixing. He cooked things, you know, that, for me, were fabulous foods. Fabulous foods based on really traditional Senegalese food but totally renewed in the context of the U.S. and Bloomington, Indiana. You know, in his *ceebujenn* fish and rice dish, he started using tilapia and swordfish. One time in 1995 he made a peanut sauce which he put cinnamon into. Cinnamon! I have to admit, the first time he did it he put too much. It tasted terrible. But this was very early on in our relationship, and he went back to Senegal and there was so much of it I had to put it in the freezer. When I took it out of the freezer and warmed it up one January day in 1996, that sauce tasted so fabulous to me. Partly, I'm sure, out of nostalgia. But the cinnamon had mellowed, and then, in future, he began to experiment, a little bit less of this, a little bit more of that. He was experimenting all the time. In cooking and on the canvas. And for me, Kalidou's movement between the studio and the pot is really, for me, the answer to this question.

JACKSON: Now, *Callaloo*, as a site for cultural practice, black diaspora cultural practice, has evolved over the last thirty years. Can you comment on your engagement with the journal, its role in your life and work and how you've noticed that evolution?

JULIEN: Well, when it started, I'll tell you, my friend Melvin Dixon was the one who said "send your translation to Charles Rowell with *Callaloo*," which is what I did. That was, as you said, in 1980. But since then *Callaloo* has really come into the limelight. I mean, I reach for *Callaloo* because it's an innovative journal and it really shows the tremendous vitality and variety of creativity in the Black world, especially the New World. It's done less with Africa than with the diaspora, at least that's my sense. But if you want to be persuaded of the diversity of black culture, look in *Callaloo*. You want to see it from the point of sexualities, national identities, gender, the range of arts and artists? Look in *Callaloo*. You want to see cutting edge ruminations on culture and where we're going? Look in *Callaloo*. So *Callaloo* is a journal that I think of as reflecting our realities and our potential and it's a journal that makes me very proud. And it's beautiful too, aesthetically.

JACKSON: Should it do more with Africa?

JULIEN: It could do more with Africa. Yes, it could.

JACKSON: Would you say that this kind of cultural production, or representation, the journal engages in, would you say that like the making of gumbo, that that too is somehow about survival?

JULIEN: Well, I think in the sense that it's giving us a kind of mixture of what's going on here and there, you know, it's reached out to Cuba and Brazil and Haiti, as a kind of forum for this kind of mixture of what's there, sure. But, also I would say I think *Callaloo* makes us conscious of it. It's the consciousness of it, you know. We can say it to ourselves, but we need to see it somewhere and *Callaloo* makes us conscious of it.

JACKSON: Thank you very much.

NOTES

1. Eileen Julien thanks Natasha Vaubel for invaluable assistance in editing.
2. See Charles H. Rowell's interview with Leah Chase, the owner of Dooky Chase, in this issue and in the "American Tragedy: New Orleans under Water" issue.
3. *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State U P, 1992).
4. Eileen Julien's husband was the artist, Kalidou Sy. Two of his works are featured in this volume.
5. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2003).
6. *African Novels and the Question of Orality* (Bloomington: Indiana U P, 1992).
7. "Terrains de rencontres: Césaire, Fanon and Wright on Culture and Decolonization." *The French Fifties*. Ed. Susan Weiner. Spec. issue of *Yale French Studies* 98 (2000): 149–66.
8. "African Literature, A Topic as Vast as a Continent." *Research and Creativity* 21.3 (1999).
9. "The Price of the Camel: A Translation of Birago Diop's Tale 'Le prix du chameau.'" *Callaloo* 3 (1980): 119–124.